

**REMARKS BY ELIZABETH SEALE**

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**for**

**WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON AGING SOLUTIONS FORUM**

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Good Morning, Chairman Hardy and members of the Policy and Advisory Committee. I would like to thank Commissioner Hine of the Texas Department on Aging and Disability Services and Jerry Thompson of the Corporation's Texas State Office for having me this morning.

I was asked to talk to you about what the faith community needs to support volunteers in national and community service. I thought of the long history of religious charities and institutions of faith in serving those in need throughout our country's history. Communities of faith are glued together by a common purpose or mission. Congregations provide a sense of belonging – of being a part of something bigger than SELF. This sense of community can motivate a congregation to get involved in service to others. Faith-based organizations and congregations are often the conduit through which individuals are able to serve the wider community.

There is nothing new about our country's reliance on organizations of faith and their role as generators of community and social capital. Today, more Americans volunteer through faith-based organizations than through any other type of organization.

When I was in Texas the weekend after hurricane Katrina hit, I learned that Second Baptist Church in Houston trained over 30,000 volunteers in time to assist with relief efforts for the evacuees arriving at the Astrodome. Many were baby boomers like me – and older. This outpouring of spontaneous volunteering is not unusual in times of great need. Just as predictable; however, is the falling off of volunteering within 6-8 weeks of a major event. Then faith-based groups face the day to day challenge of galvanizing their memberships for sustained civic engagement.

What does seem to be new, however, is the current national recognition of the relationship between faith and volunteering and an increased awareness of the powerful social capital – the enormous potential - of churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship to mobilize thousands of their congregants who, acting simply on their faith and moral principles, help tackle serious social issues.

In February of last year, the Corporation, in conjunction with the USA Freedom Corps and the Urban Institute, conducted a volunteer management capacity study to determine the potential for charities and congregations to mobilize more volunteers and to study some of the challenges to their doing so. This study revealed some interesting information about congregations that I would like to share with you for your consideration during the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

Not surprisingly, congregations are enthusiastic about using volunteers and reported that volunteers greatly increase the quality and level of service they are able to offer in answer to community needs. The study also showed that charities which partner with faith organizations can provide a wider scope of service with more volunteers

contributing more hours than organizations without this type of collaboration. Most congregations in the study reported that one of their greatest challenges, is their inability to dedicate substantial resources for paid staff to oversee volunteer efforts and implement best practices in volunteer management.

Approximately 83% of the country's 380,000 congregations engage in some form of social service activity, community development or neighborhood organizing projects. Only one in three congregations we studied reported having a paid staff person to work on volunteer coordination. While many of the largest congregations may have a Director of Lay Ministry position, these individuals generally possess minimal formal training and their responsibilities often overlap with numerous others, leaving less than 30% of their time to focus on volunteer administration. Full-time volunteer managers are very rare.

Another challenge for religious organizations is recruiting volunteers to work during business hours when needs of the community can most easily be addressed. We have an aging workforce including baby boomers and older adults who either out of desire or necessity plan to work much longer than our parents did. So, it is indeed a challenge to figure out how best to engage boomers and older working Americans in volunteer service.

Congregations are receptive to instituting best practices in volunteer management such as: regularly supervising and communicating with volunteers; assessing volunteer capacity and matching skills with need; assessing community needs and avoiding duplication of effort; working with similar or complimentary agencies to maximize effort

– but such knowledge and implementation strategies are not inherent to the task of working with volunteers.

As we look to our country's future, with 78 million baby boomers just on the horizon, we have an opportunity to see tremendous growth in volunteering from people of all faiths through their congregations – individuals available and eager to meet a variety of social needs to support and strengthen communities and our nation as a whole.

An AARP study on civic involvement found that church attendance was the best and most consistent predictor of several dimensions of community involvement: social involvement, organizational membership, and volunteering. It is interesting that the study showed us boomers are less involved in organizational memberships than our parents; however, volunteering through institutions of faith remains a cornerstone for all ages.

I speak to you today from a rich background in service to and through faith-based and community organizations serving people in need cradle to grave. It can not be stressed strongly enough that we must work to ensure that the indispensable, transforming efforts of faith-based, charitable service providers are not only encouraged but bolstered. There is growing consensus across America, that successful government social programs are more effective when they work in fruitful partnership with community and faith-based organizations — whether they are led by Methodists or Muslims, Mormons or Unitarians or people with no particular faith at all.

To alleviate some of the challenges faced by faith groups, I believe that the White House Conference on Aging Policy Committee should:

- **Support national. State and local governmental policies that promote increased volunteerism by enhancing capacity building options for the future.** Explore ways to create more flexible work days for potential volunteers as a means of engaging baby boomers and older full-time working Americans in performance based activities leading to measurable results.
- **Recognize and support the concept of trained, paid volunteer managers.** This would address a wide range of volunteer management challenges, including those faced by faith-based organizations, around volunteer recruitment; training; matching skill set to need; and sustaining involvement.
- **Support intermediaries that recruit and match volunteers.** One example is the Senior Corps, many of whose members are trained in volunteer management. Promote the use of web-based recruitment systems to help faith-based organizations which are challenged with finding sufficient numbers of volunteers.

It is imperative that government and the nonprofit sector work together to focus resources which can inspire sustained civic engagement and effective volunteerism through best practices which can then demonstrate measurable outcomes toward strengthening families and communities.